

Grant Selection Process Report (Planning Grant)

Legal Applicant:	Penquis Community Action Program	Program name:	Community Navigators AmeriCorps Program
Recommendation:	Recommend for funding		
Peer Reviewers:	F. Celeste Branham, Luke Shorty		
Grant Category:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Formula <input type="checkbox"/> Competitive <input type="checkbox"/> Other Competition	Start/End Date:	8/1/2020 to 7/31/2021
ME Priority Area:	[Economic Opportunity & Capacity building]	Fed Priority Area(s):	[Healthy Futures]
Request for New Resources			CNCS Local
New CNCS Funds:	\$50,000.00	Cost sharing proposed	66% 34%
Match Committed:	\$25,512.00	Min. Match required	0 %
Total Grant Budget:	\$75,512.00		

Statement of Need (from application narrative):

Knox County is a rural county located in Midcoast Maine, with 39,869 residents and 1,144 miles of land and water. It is classified as a 7 on the 2013 rural-urban continuum by the USDA. There are 26 communities in the county with Rockland, population 7,102, as the largest city and county seat. Several unbridged islands are served by ferries and one, located 20 miles from the mainland, is the farthest inhabited land off of the east coast of the United States. The population is 96.3% white and 28.7% of residents are over the age of 65. There are pockets of affluence and deep poverty within these communities but 2019 census estimates show 11% of all residents live in poverty level circumstances. Rockland has a poverty rate that exceeds 17% based on 2019 estimates. The latest reports (April 2020) show a 12.2% unemployment rate in Knox County, the highest number ever recorded.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created social and economic consequences that have disrupted the State of Maine as a civil emergency was put in place by the governor of Maine. Knox County communities have experienced significant effects of mandatory business closings and "shelter in place" executive orders since mid-March 2020 and slow, phased reopening and restrictions upon out-of-state travelers even now in early June 2020. The county's traditional reliance on limited seasonal employment in the hospitality and commercial fishing sectors means even in the best of times many residents scramble to making a living during a very short summer season. There is a high reliance on supported community resources such as food pantries, SNAP, TANF, MaineCare (Medicaid) and the Home Energy Assistance Program amongst our low-income residents. Municipalities are mandated by State of Maine statute to provide general assistance services to citizens; however, each jurisdiction can budget as it deems appropriate and are not required to follow a mandated minimum of monies for residents in need. Need for economic support is expected to rapidly accelerate after the expiration of the federal unemployment supplement in July 2020. Financially vulnerable community members are at higher risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 due to health disparities related to poverty and limited

resources and income to provide for basic necessities such as rent, housing, medications, food and cleaning supplies.

As the CIKC has funded over 100 applicants in the most recent 18 months, it has become clear that low-income Knox County individuals and families require greater support in creating responsible goals to manage the challenging consequences of poverty. CIKC is increasingly called upon to offer information and referral services for navigating options of support both for community members as well as allied social service organizations. This insight has been a focal point of the current strategic planning process undertaken by CIKC for our first three-year strategic plan. We have engaged with this planning work since the beginning of 2020 and anticipate completing our plan in July 2020. We have committed to pursuing the AmeriCorps planning grant to assist us with the necessary resources to move to an implementation proposal to CNCS in 2021.

Rebecca Dinces, the Penquis Regional Manager for Knox County, is the lead staff person for this grant. She serves as president of the CIKC and also serves in a volunteer capacity as a mentor in the Building Advocates Leaders program. The Leaders program was initiated as a partnership between Good Shepherd Food Bank and AIO Food and Energy Assistance, one of CIKC founding partners, in early 2019. It has trained an initial group of 10 community members who represent the lived experience of poverty in our county to address access and inequality concerns to elected officials, social service organizations and the media. This group's advocacy expansion in the spring of 2020 was curtailed due to pandemic conditions but is expected to at least double in size upon the easing of restrictions on group meeting activities and size. The Leaders have identified securing reliable, understandable information and referral services as a desperately needed community resource.

The six CIKC partners expect to collaborate with the Building Advocates Leaders members on planning efforts to address the needs of and conduct effective outreach to low-income residents of Knox County. The AmeriCorps project site will be based in Rockland, but program activities ultimately will be conducted at sites across the county.

Program Summary (from application):

The Penquis Community Action Program (Penquis) proposes a planning grant to ultimately have three AmeriCorps members who will serve as Resource Navigators in the Knox County jurisdiction of the State of Maine. At the end of the first program year, the AmeriCorps members will be responsible for implementing an information and referral support service as Community Resource Navigators for low income residents. In addition, the AmeriCorps members will leverage at least 25 volunteers who will be trained in community resource navigation and engaged in promoting these services to the community. This program will focus on the CNCS focus area(s) of Economic Opportunity and Capacity Building.

Identified partners:

- AIO Area Interfaith Food and Energy Assistance
- Knox County Community Health Coalition
- United MidCoast Charities
- New Hope for Women
- Knox County Homeless Coalition

Applicant proposes to deliver services: (select what the applicant states in their application that their program will cover:

- ☐ Within a single municipality
 ☐ Within a single County but not covering the entire County
☒ County-wide in a single County
 ☐ Multiple Counties but not Statewide
☐ Statewide

Final Recommendation of Grant Selection and Performance Task Force:

That proposal be awarded a 1-year AmeriCorps Planning grant with funding set at \$50,000 for the Federal Share and a grantee share of at least \$25,000.

SCORING DETAIL

I. Summary of Peer Reviewer Consensus Scores

(update annually to match CNCS changes in point distribution or organization of narrative)

CATEGORY	Final Ratings	Consensus Score
Rationale & Approach/Program Design Section (50%)		
Need and Target Community(ies)	Strong	15
Response to Need	Strong	15
Readiness for Planning	Strong	15
Expertise and Training	Strong	5
Organizational Capability Overall Rating 25%		
Organizational Background and Staffing	Strong	25
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy 25%		
Cost Effectiveness and Budget Adequacy	Adequate	16.75
Evaluation or Data Collection		
N/A		N/A
Total		91.75
Strongly Recommend for Further Review		

II. Summary of Task Force Consensus Rating and Final Score:

Category	Rating	Numeric Score
Program Alignment & Model (15 possible points)	Adequate	10.05
Past Performance (15 possible points)	Strong	15
Financial Plan (10 possible points)	Adequate	6.7
Fiscal Systems (10 possible points)	Strong	10
GTF Review Total:		41.75

III. Final Combined Score

Total	133.5
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Final Assessment of Application:

- ☐ Fund with no Corrections
☒ Fund with Corrections
☐ Do Not Fund

Referenced Conditions/Corrections:

- Although there is no grantee share, the Source of Funds lists agency resources that will be applied to the project.
- Minor errors in calculations and budget need to be corrected.
(Staff note: Completed on 6/22)

PEER REVIEWER COMMENTS COMPILED**Section: Program Design (50 %)****Need and Target Community(ies)**

- The 12.2% unemployment rate is higher than the State's overall rate at 10.6% and slightly under the national rate reported most recently for May at 13.3%. The need is expected to rise as certain critical industries in this region are stalled in their reopening.
- The impact on the Seasonal Employment of the Rockland / Midcoast area and how that is an economic engine for the surrounding rural communities.

Response to Need

- The number of agencies that are able to participate in the coordination of resources and referrals was strong. Moreover, the investment in outreach to county jail, substance use disorder recovery programs, assisted living facilities and subsidized housing, places of worship, senior centers, day care centers, and schools would be worthwhile, if they can leverage an additional 25 volunteers, which is ambitious. Otherwise they will have to lower their sights and set priorities for outreach.
- Being able to get the data from the six partner organizations is helpful in gauging need during the pandemic and the concern about what happens when the Federal Aid ends in July is an important one. Since these six partner organizations have a wide net and hear from many constituents, they seem to have an accurate read of what is happening on the ground.

Readiness for Planning

- The urgency described by the COVID-19 impact and the anticipation of greater numbers driven into poverty, represent an attitudinal predisposition; however, the existence of the CIKC seems a ready-made source of/framework for support and coordination, with ample experience.
- Ms. Dinces seems like she has the experience necessary and having an advisory committee made up of the partner organizations makes me feel confident and strongly in their ability to achieve the goals laid out in this grant.

Expertise and Training

- Previously familiar with AmeriCorps guidelines and funding requirements through VM.
- The team of experts who help administrate and lead the partner organizations seem fairly capable. It appears that they have enough expertise to make sure they are on top of their mission and can get the training they need to execute this grant.

Section: Organizational Capability (25 %)**Organizational Background and Staffing**

- Penquis CAP is a sophisticated and stable agency involved in poverty mitigation since 1967. They are equipped through their long-term experience and current staffing structure to succeed in this planning initiative. There is concern relates to their ability to attract 25 volunteers eventually to engage in community resource navigation.
- Looking at the 53-year history of the organization, it appears they have the track record of succeeding at their mission.

Section: Cost and Budget Adequacy (25 %)

- There is nothing in the budget profile to cause serious alarm; however, two items: a) the use of a consultant for 10 hours in this phase (total=\$1,000). Perhaps as they apply for CNCS program development monies in 2021, a consultant might be indicated at that time; b) the travel budget is much higher than the training budget by a 4-1 margin, and they might need more expended in training.
- It listed out what the CNCS money will be used for but didn't get into the detail on what their match will be used for.

SUMMARY APPRAISAL

1. Having reviewed all elements of the proposal provided to you, do you think that this applicant would be effective in this category of grant?

Yes

Comments:

- Penquis CAP is a solid organization that has myriad experiences with planning grants in their long history. This will not be a complex process for them, nor is the planning focus unattainable. Additionally, they have a ready-made structure in the CIKC through which they can realize their objectives.
- This partnership between organizations and Penquis is strong, their history has shown success in the past, and they will be effective in addressing this communities current need.

What elements of the proposal are unclear?

The only lack of clarity arises in the number of AmeriCorps volunteers (25) that they claim the original AmeriCorps members (3) are expected to leverage and train as Community Resource Navigators. This seems ambitious and uncertain, which will require them to re-prioritize outreach efforts.

What else do you have to say about this proposal?

- It was well conceived overall and solid in its presentation.
- It is unfortunate that this program only focuses on Knox County. Since Penquis also serves Penobscot and Piscataquis Counties. These counties are even more rural in places than Knox county and it is possible that they too are struggling due to the impact of COVID-19 on their communities. It would be nice to see this program do more in helping out the people in Piscataquis and Northern Penobscot County.

TASK FORCE REVIEWER COMMENT DETAIL:

Program Model

- Seems like a solid model to build the capacity of this coalition in the region.
- The goal of the program is to address Capacity Building in Knox County, which qualifies as a rural area. This specifically address the priorities for this grant type. The need is clearly defined and based on the experience of Penquis and its partner agencies in the CIKC organization. With both Penquis and these organizations involved, there is a strong existing base in Knox County to build on through this program. It is also clear that the COVID pandemic will place additional burdens on the safety net programs in this county and increase the need for navigation support. The notion of training navigators is also appealing in that it recognizes how complicated our social service/assistance systems (or lack thereof) are and how important it is for someone to be there to help folks who are often overwhelmed with problems and issues and unsure of how to proceed. The fact that the AC members will first compile

the needed reference guides and then train community volunteers to be navigators also shows how the program can be integrated into the systems and agencies now in place to ensure that it continues once AC funding is exhausted. The navigator model is also transferable to other areas of the state, especially rural areas with limited social services infrastructures. Penquis and the partner agencies also have significant experience in developing and managing volunteer programs. One caveat: I note that the AC members would be placed with one of the Knox County partner agencies. I would be somewhat concerned that this might result in "mission co-option" where the day to day needs of the agencies could supersede the goals of the program. This should be carefully addressed in the planning process along with steps to ensure that the AC members form and interact as a team. Overall, this is one of the best presented proposals seen in a long time.

- The proposed efforts mimic a community health worker/community navigator model used with success in other places. Penquis as backbone agency seems well positioned to serve as the backbone for collective impact alongside the Community Investors. Would like to have seen more data-based assessment of need to communicate that the five areas for improvement were aligned with community needs.

Past Performance

- Currently holds AmeriCorps Grants.
- Penquis is a large and well-established agency that has dealt with significant federal grants, is the current home to two Senior Corps Programs, and has experienced staff in key positions including as program manager, HR, and Finance/Accounting. Many best volunteer management practices are already in place. These strengths should assist in assuring that the program will be successful.
- Penquis has been in existence since 1967, has statewide impact, and has a solid track record with quality assurance standards evident.

Financial Plan

- The plan looks solid.
- Simply reflecting the miscalculations and missing calculations noted by Staff comments
- Some budget corrections are required. Note that a local match is indicated, although not required in this grant cycle.
- Grantee share was included but not needed. Budget doesn't seem to support additional capacity building other than added consultants.

Fiscal Systems

- They financial expertise on staff looks strong.
- Again, Penquis is a large and well-established agency that has the resources and fiscal systems in place to handle this grant and the various federal requirements that go along with it.
- Penquis indicates having the necessary elements to receive and administer grant funds, a consortium of partners to govern the process, and a track record of successful operation.

Task Force Summary Appraisal

Having reviewed all elements of the proposal provided to you, do you think that this applicant would be effective?

- YES

Why or why not? Please be specific and cite evidence from the proposal.

- The goals of this proposal would address a need in an area that is undeserved and would give the individual organizations the experience needed for future grants.
- The program concept is sound and will be based in a rural area where Penquis has an existence presence and has developed an agency network and community activist volunteer support; the agency has the personnel and systems (Management, HR, Volunteer, and Fiscal) to manage the grant successfully.

- All of the elements are in place. The idea of a community investors model supporting a community navigation program to be innovative and a strong precursor to a system with capacity to identify resources, direct people to them, and fund gaps that may exist. Interesting idea.

What elements of the proposal are unclear?

- Given that this is a planning grant, there is an inherent lack of detail. The one area that should be closely evaluated in the planning process is where the AC members will be placed, ensuring that they will not lose sight of the program goals in view of immediate agency needs, and developing a working team approach among the members.
- The budget seems to put most of the funds into salaries for the Director and finance person, seemingly as operating funds, one could expect them to split funds across agencies to incentivize participation in the planning process.

What else do you have to say about this proposal?

- The lift this grant could potentially provide to not only the specified service area, but to the multiple stakeholders. It's the hope that staff will not be overloaded with the work to help with this lift and other grant applicant programs.
- Excellent proposal that should be successful in future funding competition as well as in impact in the Knox County community